

who described politics as who gets what when and how

who described politics as who gets what when and how is a fundamental question in political science that traces back to a seminal definition provided by a prominent scholar. This phrase encapsulates the essence of political processes and decision-making, highlighting the distribution of resources, power, and opportunities within a society. Understanding who coined this phrase and its implications is crucial for students, researchers, and enthusiasts of political theory and governance. This article delves into the origins of the definition, explores its meaning, and examines its relevance in contemporary political analysis. Additionally, the discussion includes various interpretations and applications of this concept in political science, providing a comprehensive overview for those interested in the mechanics of politics.

- The Origin of the Definition
- Understanding the Meaning of the Phrase
- Applications in Political Science
- Critiques and Alternative Perspectives
- Significance in Modern Political Discourse

The Origin of the Definition

The phrase "who gets what, when, and how" is famously attributed to Harold D. Lasswell, an influential American political scientist and communications theorist. Lasswell introduced this concise definition to encapsulate the complex processes involved in political activity. His work, primarily during the mid-20th century, sought to simplify the understanding of politics by framing it as a matter of resource allocation and decision-making. Lasswell's definition has since become a foundational concept in political science, often cited in textbooks and scholarly discussions to clarify the core function of politics in society.

Harold D. Lasswell's Contribution

Harold D. Lasswell was a pioneering figure who significantly shaped the field of political science. His definition of politics as "who gets what, when, and how" was part of his broader efforts to analyze political behavior and

communication systematically. Lasswell's approach emphasized the distributional nature of politics, focusing on the outcomes of political processes rather than merely ideological or institutional aspects. This perspective helped shift the study of politics towards empirical analysis and policy-oriented research.

Historical Context

Lasswell introduced this definition during a period when political science was evolving into a more scientific discipline. The mid-20th century saw increased interest in behavioral approaches and empirical methods, and Lasswell's phrasing succinctly captured the essence of political competition and governance. His work laid the groundwork for later developments in policy analysis, political psychology, and communication studies, making the phrase a lasting contribution to political vocabulary.

Understanding the Meaning of the Phrase

The phrase "who gets what, when, and how" distills politics into a question of distribution and timing. It implies that political processes revolve around determining the allocation of resources, privileges, and power among individuals and groups within a society. Each component of the phrase addresses a specific aspect of political decision-making:

- **Who:** Identifies the actors involved, such as individuals, groups, political parties, or institutions.
- **Gets what:** Refers to the resources, benefits, rights, or opportunities distributed through political mechanisms.
- **When:** Highlights the timing or sequencing of political decisions and allocations.
- **How:** Explores the methods, processes, and institutions through which decisions are made and resources are allocated.

Political Processes and Resource Allocation

This definition underscores the transactional and competitive nature of politics. Politics is seen as a contest over scarce resources, where various actors negotiate, bargain, or compete to secure advantages. The phrase emphasizes that political outcomes are not random but result from deliberate choices made within institutional frameworks. It also recognizes that timing and procedural mechanisms affect who benefits from political decisions.

Implications for Political Analysis

By focusing on who benefits and how, this definition guides analysts to investigate power relations, interest groups, policy outcomes, and institutional roles. It encourages examination of political behavior, electoral dynamics, policymaking processes, and governance structures. This approach facilitates a clearer understanding of how political systems function and how decisions impact society.

Applications in Political Science

The phrase has been widely used in various subfields of political science to frame research questions and theoretical models. Its applicability spans comparative politics, public policy, political sociology, and international relations, demonstrating its versatility as a conceptual tool.

Policy Analysis and Decision-Making

In public policy, Lasswell's definition helps analyze how policies are formulated, who influences them, and who benefits from their implementation. It encourages scrutiny of stakeholder interests, institutional constraints, and procedural fairness. Policy analysts use this framework to assess the distributional impacts of governmental decisions and to advocate for equitable policies.

Power and Interest Group Politics

The concept is central to understanding power dynamics and interest group behavior. Political actors seek to maximize their gains ("what") at favorable times ("when") through various strategies ("how"). This lens reveals the competitive nature of politics and the importance of coalition-building, lobbying, and negotiation in achieving desired outcomes.

Electoral Politics and Voting Behavior

In electoral studies, the phrase guides analysis of how candidates and parties compete for votes by promising resources or benefits to particular constituencies. It also helps explain voter decision-making based on perceived gains and the timing of elections. This framework supports the examination of campaign strategies and voter mobilization efforts.

Critiques and Alternative Perspectives

While widely accepted, Lasswell's definition has faced critiques and inspired

alternative views that expand or challenge its scope. These perspectives highlight different dimensions of politics beyond mere resource allocation.

Criticism of Reductionism

Some scholars argue that defining politics solely as "who gets what, when, and how" reduces complex political phenomena to transactional exchanges, neglecting normative, cultural, and ideological factors. Politics also involves values, identity, legitimacy, and collective meaning, which this definition might overlook.

Alternative Definitions

Other political theorists emphasize different aspects of politics, such as:

1. **Power and Authority:** Defining politics as the exercise of power and the establishment of authority structures.
2. **Conflict and Cooperation:** Viewing politics as the management of conflict and the pursuit of collective goals.
3. **Governance and Institution-Building:** Focusing on the creation and maintenance of political institutions and rule of law.

These broader definitions complement Lasswell's by incorporating additional dimensions of political life.

Significance in Modern Political Discourse

The enduring relevance of the phrase "who gets what, when, and how" in contemporary political discourse reflects its effectiveness as a heuristic for analyzing political phenomena. It remains a foundational concept taught in political science courses and referenced in discussions about governance, policy, and power distribution.

Use in Contemporary Political Analysis

Modern political analysts apply this framework to evaluate issues such as income inequality, social justice, resource allocation, and electoral strategies. It serves as a starting point for understanding complex political interactions in democratic and non-democratic contexts alike.

Influence on Political Communication

Lasswell's broader work on communication and propaganda also connects to this definition, emphasizing how information, persuasion, and media influence "who gets what." Political messaging and public opinion shape the processes and outcomes described by the phrase, highlighting its multifaceted relevance.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who originally described politics as 'who gets what, when, and how'?

Harold Lasswell, a political scientist, originally described politics as 'who gets what, when, and how' in his analysis of political processes.

What is the significance of Harold Lasswell's definition of politics as 'who gets what, when, and how'?

Lasswell's definition emphasizes the distribution of resources and power in society, highlighting politics as the process through which different groups compete to obtain benefits.

In what context did Harold Lasswell describe politics as 'who gets what, when, and how'?

Lasswell described politics this way in his 1936 book 'Politics: Who Gets What, When, How,' focusing on the dynamics of power and resource allocation.

How does Lasswell's definition of politics differ from other political definitions?

Unlike broader or normative definitions, Lasswell's definition is pragmatic and focuses on the distribution aspect of politics, viewing it as a struggle over resources.

Why is Lasswell's phrase 'who gets what, when, and how' still relevant in political science today?

Because it succinctly captures the essence of political competition and decision-making about resource allocation, which remains central to understanding political systems.

Can Lasswell's concept of 'who gets what, when, and how' be applied beyond politics?

Yes, the concept can be applied to various organizational and social contexts where power dynamics and resource distribution are involved.

What disciplines have been influenced by Lasswell's definition of politics?

Political science, sociology, public administration, and communication studies have all been influenced by Lasswell's pragmatic approach to politics.

How does the phrase 'who gets what, when, and how' help in understanding policy-making?

It highlights that policy-making is about deciding which groups receive what resources, at what time, and through what mechanisms, underscoring the competitive and strategic nature of politics.

Additional Resources

1. Politics: Who Gets What, When, How by Harold D. Lasswell

This seminal work by Harold D. Lasswell introduces the famous definition of politics as "who gets what, when, how." Lasswell explores the distribution of power and resources in society, analyzing how political decisions are made and who benefits from them. The book is foundational in political science, emphasizing the importance of understanding the mechanisms behind policy-making and resource allocation.

2. The Political Economy of Power by Robert A. Dahl

Robert Dahl expands on the idea of politics as the struggle over resources and power. This book examines how different groups compete to influence political outcomes and how power is distributed in democratic societies. Dahl's analysis is crucial for understanding pluralism and the dynamics of political influence.

3. Power and Politics by Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz

Bachrach and Baratz delve into the concept of power beyond visible decision-making, introducing the idea of non-decision-making power. This book complements Lasswell's definition by highlighting how control over the political agenda affects who gets what, when, and how. It is an important contribution to the study of political power and influence.

4. The Logic of Collective Action by Mancur Olson

Olson's work explains how individuals and groups organize to pursue their interests in politics. The book discusses the challenges of collective action and how it affects the allocation of resources and benefits. It is essential

for understanding the mechanisms behind political cooperation and competition.

5. *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* by Robert A. Dahl
This empirical study explores the distribution of political power in New Haven, Connecticut, providing practical insights into who actually gets what, when, and how in a democratic context. Dahl's research highlights the complexities of political influence and the role of various social groups in governance.

6. *Agenda-Setting in Politics* by John W. Kingdon
Kingdon focuses on how political agendas are formed and how certain issues come to the forefront of political decision-making. The book explains the processes that determine who gets what by influencing when and how issues are addressed. It offers a detailed look at the interplay between problems, policies, and politics.

7. *The Politics of Resource Allocation* by E. E. Schattschneider
Schattschneider analyzes the conflict inherent in the distribution of resources and the role of political institutions in mediating these conflicts. The book builds on Lasswell's definition by examining how political struggles shape who benefits from public policies. It is a classic text on the politics of economic distribution.

8. *Power: A Radical View* by Steven Lukes
Lukes presents a multidimensional view of power that extends beyond observable decision-making to include control over desires and perceptions. This book deepens the understanding of how power operates in determining who gets what, when, and how, challenging traditional notions of political power.

9. *Theories of Political Process* edited by David Easton
This collection of essays offers a comprehensive overview of different approaches to understanding political processes, including the distribution of resources and power. The book situates Lasswell's definition within broader theoretical frameworks, helping readers grasp the complexity of political dynamics.

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